

The Similarities and Differences between the Goals of Bilingual Education in China and the United States

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Abstract: This paper studies the similarities and differences between the goals of bilingual education in China and the United States. China and the U. S. have similar purposes in providing bilingual education to language minorities at the elementary-secondary school level. The Americans use bilingual education as a remedy, but most Chinese treat it as a tool for tangible interests. American colleges and universities provide monolingual instruction only, but their Chinese counterparts are promoting bilingual instruction today. Many have considered American bilingual education a failure. The validity of China’s collegiate bilingual instruction is under debating. More research work must be done before we learn how bilingual education may be efficiently and effectively provided to different groups with various educational needs.

Key words: bilingual education; comparative education; language minority

1. Introduction

Common sense tells us that bilingual education is not foreign language education, though they all have direct relations with language learning and use. “Foreign” has a political flavor to distinguish alien languages from the native. Bilingual education, according to Anderson and Boyer, “is instruction in two languages and the use of those two languages as mediums of instruction for any part of or all of the school curriculum” (Anderson and Boyer, 1970). This definition is valid both in the United States and China for its practicality. In research literature, there has not been any documentation that conceptually distinguishes bilingual education from bilingual instruction, though these two terms have been used interchangeably in China. From the author’s perspective, bilingual education requires both teachers and students take initials to use two media languages actively in the completion of a learning task. In contrast, bilingual instruction tends to be the teachers’ business to work with two languages, the students being passive receivers only.

There are similarities and differences between the goals of bilingual education in the United States and China. Inescapably, different goals have impacts on the selections of target groups, language media, learning materials, program approaches, and instructional strategies and techniques. In the following passages, the characteristics of these two countries’ goals of bilingual education as well as their influences on educational practices are briefly discussed.

2. The Goals of Bilingual Education for Language Minority Students

Officially, China established bilingual education services to her language minorities in the 1950s (YU

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Hui-bang, 1995), being about two decades earlier than did the United States. These two countries have similar goals in providing bilingual education to language minority students at the elementary-secondary school level. The initial two goals have been: Using students' first languages (L1) to facilitate learning subject matters; assisting their acquisition of the mainstream languages (L2) for work and communication in respective larger societies. In China, the mainstream, also the official language is Chinese with *putonghua*—the common speech for all—as its standard oral form. There are hundreds of minority tongues and dialects in China, although the minority population has been less than six percent of the national demography. Similar situation exists in the United States with English as the dominating, or de facto official, language while almost 18 percent of the nation speaks a language other than English at home that may be from any corner of the world (US Census Bureau, 2006). In higher learning, neither country has mentioned the use of minority's L1 except in special language programs.

Supporters believe that the best way for children to knowledge and literacy is their primary language because it is easier to learn to read in a language they understand (Krashen, 1997). They need the help of L1 to initiate and deepen comprehension in L2. The combination of L1 and L2 subject matter teaching and literacy development is the first characteristic of a good bilingual program. Quality bilingual programs include all of these three steps: content and literacy instruction in L1; L2 instruction; sheltered subject matter instruction. Children initially receive core instruction in L1 along with L2 learning. As their L2 grows more proficient, they learn subjects such as math and science with contextualized L2. This process will gradually help children exit bilingual programs and merge into mainstream classes. In advanced levels of learning in senior high schools and colleges, students do not need to use L1 unless they do studies in social studies and language arts that demand the most abstract use of the language (YU, 1995).

China and USA did not have any communication in the 1950s-1960s. Though their socio-economic structures have been drastically different, these two countries had had similar considerations to guide the education of their own language minority children. The students whose first languages (L1) are not Chinese in China may attend schools designed and supported by the government in which their mother tongues are used in parallel with standard Chinese. This type of schools has been found in areas where there is enough minority population to call upon such a school and where bilingual teachers are available. In the United States, the situation has been about the same: minority students may attend bilingual schools or classes in a school district if they have difficulties to attend English classes.

There are four major types of bilingual education programs: English as a Second Language (ESL), Submersion, Immersion, and Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE). In an ESL program, students receive most instruction in English-only classes, plus taking specially designed English as a subject-matter lesson during the day. An ESL teacher may have limited knowledge about students' L1s and home cultures. It was considered one way of bilingual education in the old days, and is still the major approach to start bilingual education. In a Submersion program, a student is put in an ordinary English-only classroom to "sink or swim". Usually, the teacher does not know the student's L1, nor is it used at all in the classroom. Immersion programs provide instruction in English. Immersion teachers are bilingual but speak English most of the time, allowing their students to address them in students' first languages. In a TBE program, reading is taught in both L1 and L2. At the beginning, L1 is used more than L2. The use of L1 is gradually reduced and paced out, as students' L2 is growing steadily stronger. TBE teachers must be bilingual, too.

Several other kinds of bilingual programs may be found in the States. Sheltered Instruction and Language

Maintenance are different names of TBE by nature because it has the same purpose to replace L1 with L2. Two-Way bilingual programs are different from the other types, in which teaching and learning are processed in both languages. In Two-Way classes, monolingual English students are mixed with students from non-English families in hope that they will develop proficiency in both L1 and L2. Although it has been widely used in Canada, Two-Way programs are few in the United States.

In recent years, Bilingual education for language minority students is shrinking in both USA and China. Since the late 1990s, there has been a drive in America to cease bilingual education to language minority students. Some States such as California and Arizona have passed laws to stop the services with excuses of its inefficiency and high cost (Eldridge, 2002). Worries of increasing minority population and concerns for the power of the English language have caused cutback, even cancellation, of bilingual programs.

In China's remote areas, many minority people speak local Chinese dialects and *putonghua*. They watch TV programs and listen to radios, and acquire *putonghua* beautifully. They want that schools offer English classes. Their voices to participate in global economy and communication are louder than that to maintain their mother tongues, which are essential components of their indigenous cultures.

3. The Goal of Bilingual Education for the Rich Monolingual Children

Recent global changes in economy and international relations seem to revitalize bilingual education in the two countries under discussion. As a new member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), China is trying to take advantage of the opportunities and to meet the challenges. Linguistic and cultural differences are viewed two major barriers for effective communication. Bilingual education is becoming an exclusive for the rich in the cities who wish that their children be able to command English for worldwide business and communication. For them, bilingual education is a ladder in the society, an economic tool, and a pass to the better outside world. According to Wang Bin-hua (WANG Bin-hua, 2003), "the ultimate purpose of bilingual education in our country (China) is to improve students' English proficiency to meet the needs of the nation, the community, and the individuals for future advancement" (ibid). While its function to serve the language minority has well been forgotten even by the leading bilingual educators, numerous bilingual kindergartens and elementary-middle schools are burgeoning in big cities.

In this kind of Chinese bilingual schools, English as a foreign language, similar to ESL, is taught across all grades. A few Two-Way programs are seen in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou where crowds of foreign families reside. ESL and Two-Way teaching crews are mixed with trained Chinese and native English speakers. In most cases, the native English speakers speak very little Chinese.

From the 1970s, a number of American academicians have been advocating helping monolinguals get a second language through bilingual education while providing it to language minority children (Vasquez, 1976). Right after "911", the U. S. government pushes Americans to learn "critical" foreign languages such as Chinese, Arabian, Korean, and Japanese, that are of national security concern (Center for Advanced Study of Language, 2004). In a number of affluent school districts, Two-Way bilingual education programs at the elementary level become the favorite where parents have the vision of future benefits for their children and schools have the ability to provide quality services. In these programs, students are from monolingual families and non-English speaking families. They are expected to become competent enough to use both L1 and L2 for academic work and social life. However, they seldom stay in these Two-Way bilingual programs beyond the fifth grade.

It is important to point out the differences in the financial resources of bilingual education between China and the United States. Most American bilingual programs are for limited English proficient children, and have depended upon government funding. In China, bilingual schooling for minority children is fully funded by the central government. Most bilingual schools around the country, except for a few hundreds in the more developed cities like Shanghai, Nanjing and Guangzhou, are independent institutions supported with private money.

4. Bilingual Instruction in China's Colleges and Universities

Currently, there is a trend in China's colleges and universities to provide bilingual institutions in various fields, especially in sciences, engineering, finance, business management, and political science. These two languages are Chinese and a foreign one, mostly English (L2). This type of courses is different from college English that focuses on language learning only. There are two major purposes. The first one is to empower China's elite youths to get advanced sciences and technologies directly from the outside world with a foreign language. Second, it must help students develop bilingual language skills for efficient and effective worldwide communication by the integration of L2 learning with academic content studies.

Although it is debatable, the characteristics of these bilingual courses may categorize themselves as bilingual education since they are part of the curriculum. Following the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education, schools are encouraged to adopt authentic English textbooks published in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom where research in sciences and technologies is more advanced. Some schools permit to use less L2 at the beginning of a bilingual course, and steadily phase out students' L1. Many institutions require that any explanation written on the chalkboard must be in English, and so be the language of any instructional auxiliary. L2 must be the major medium, although L1 is allowed to air in the classroom. It is encouraged to have all coursework done in L2, including teaching, writing on board, exercises, and examinations. In any case, over half of the exercises and examinations must be done in L2 (Hainan University, 2005). The bilingual instructor must have expertise in his or her field, and must be fluent in L2. These requirements indicate that the program approach of Chinese collegiate bilingual instruction is a mixture of immersion, sheltered studies, and transitional approach.

It is clear that the utilitarian nature of China's collegiate bilingual education is highly demanding on the qualifications of the faculty and the capacity of the students. Numerous problems are reported on its feasibility, necessity, and effectiveness. The lack of qualified teachers bottles up the promotion of bilingual courses. Student limited English proficiency makes it difficult for them to comprehend proper academic contents. The sociolinguistic environment on Chinese campuses does not naturally favor the use of a foreign language as a medium of communication (ZHU Pu, 2001; BI Xiao-yu, HUANG Fang, 2003). In addition, the attitude of instrumentalism towards a foreign language restrains full understanding and appreciation of the related culture and society.

5. Conclusion

It is instructive that the approaches and methods are similar when the goals of bilingual education are compensatory in either country discussed here. China and the United States have had the same decisions on the education of their language minority children in terms of age groups and grades, content of learning, and program approaches. On this matter, the union of the nation and the socio-economic development in the country are of the

major concern by each. In the case of language compensation, all sides have largely neglected the ideal of L1 maintenance.

American governments have strict regulations on bilingual teacher qualification. In contrast, China has not developed one to date. Useful information may also be drawn from the American experiences why they consider bilingual education a high-cost, low-gain business. The author does agree that bilingual ability is a life asset for any people who have it. However, does bilingual education suit everybody? Will everybody need it? The priorities in people’s education may have to be different as we are from different economic, educational, and linguistic backgrounds.

It is too early to say how bilingual education should be provided to people who have different language and schooling needs. It is dangerous to seek international standards in bilingual education that interweave with cultural values, social needs, public choices, and personal preferences. The Chinese scholars must be watchful that there are not any models, such as American Two-Way or Canadian Immersion approaches, that are perfect enough for the Chinese to copy.

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(Edited by CHEN Jing)